NANSEMOND INDIANS

ISLE OF WIGHT LIBRARY
SMITHFIELD BRANCH

Oliver Perry and the Nansemonds

In Chesapeake, Virginia, this man is working to re-establish the tribe of his ancestors.

BY CARL CAHILL

If Oliver Perry succeeds, the Commonwealth of Virginia may officially recognize another of its native Indian tribes.

Perry, great-great-grandson of a full-blooded Nansemond Indian woman, wants to organize formally descendents of the tribe to preserve their heritage and to have it chartered by Virginia's State Corporation Commission.

The 62-year-old Virginia Beach man began his task three years ago, when his children asked about their native American background. "I started digging to substantiate what I had been told," says Perry.

He found much information on the tribe at the Indiana United Methodist Church, in the Bowers Hill section of Chesapeake. Organized in 1850 as a mission school for the Nansemonds, the church has a membership of 81, 10 of whom are of Indian descent.

The Nansemonds, least-known of the Virginia tribes, occupied territory including Isle of Wight, Nansemond, and Norfolk counties when Europeans arrived in 1607. They planted corn and hunted in the Dismal Swamp, east and southeast of Suffolk.

The tribe numbered about 750, and when Captain John Smith fought them near Jamestown, they had 300 warriors. Their principal village was at Reid's Ferry, near Chuckatuck in Suffolk.

Historians, however, disagree about the Nansemonds. James Mooney, in *The Powhatan Confederacy, Past and Present,* published in the American Anthropologist in 1907, notes there were 200 in 1607, 200 in 1616, 45 during the Virginia census of 1669, and only 20 in 1705.

In any case, the Nansemonds were among the more than 30 tribes making up the Powhatan Confederacy, organized by the great chief whose daughter, Pocahontas, reputedly saved Captain Smith's life.

Most chroniclers of early Virginia history agree, however, that time, disease, the white man, and intertribal warfare took their toll. By 1902 Col. W.H. Stewart, in his *History of Norfolk County,* wrote that only 180 Nansemonds were left.

In time, as the state became more civilized, the Mattaponis, Pamunkeys, Upper Mattaponis, Chickahominies, Eastern Chickahominies, and Rappahannocks all were officially recognized and chartered by the Commonwealth of Virginia. The Mattaponis and Pamunkeys still have reservations southeast of Richmond.

But the Nansemonds fell on hard times, and in 1907 Mooney notes the absence of state recognition or tribal organization. "They are all truck farmers, shipping their produce to Norfolk commission houses," Mooney writes. "Many also have served from time to time as sailors on coasting vessels. . . . Although without any regular chief, their principal man is probably A.A. Bass, of Bowers Hill, Norfolk County." Mooney traced one Nansemond

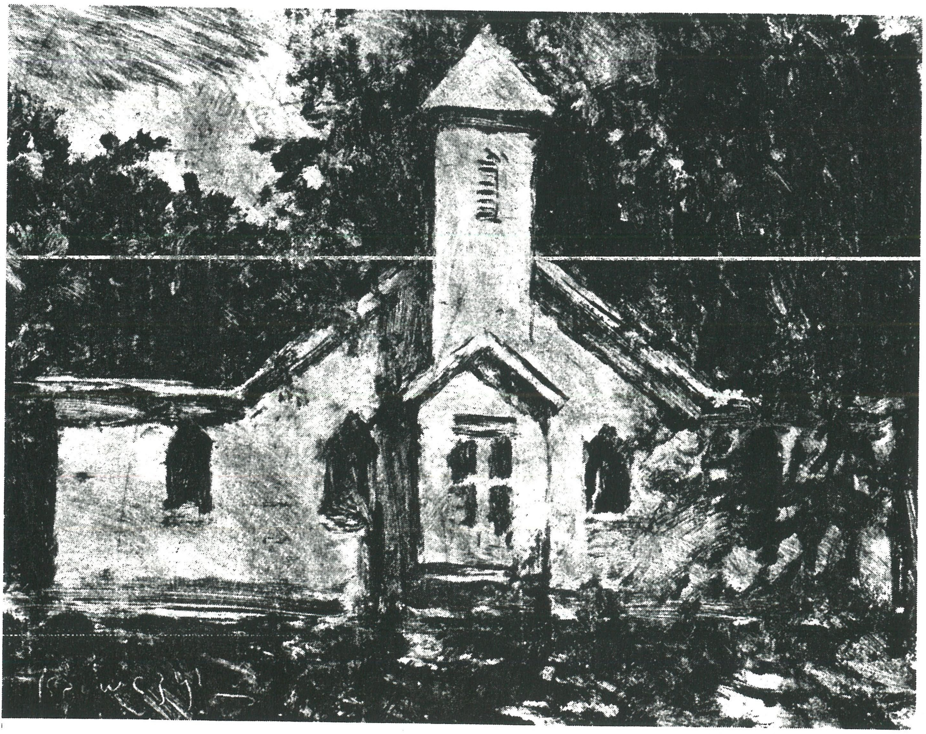


Illustration by Krawczyk

The Indiana United Methodist Church in Chesapeake, Virginia, was originally organized as a mission school for the Nansemonds in 1850 and is at the center of the effort to revive the tribe.

family to Savannah, four to Baltimore, and one to Philadelphia.

Some Nansemond heritage may have been lost as far back as 1792, when the 300-acre Nansemond reservation in Southampton County was sold by the last three surviving people entitled to it. With much of their identity gone, it was difficult for the Nansemonds to catch the attention of anyone in the state capital.

"They are the only ones that don't have official state recognition," says Perry, a retired civil servant. His first step to remedy this shortcoming was to call a meeting of Nansemond descendants late in July 1984 at, appropriately, the Indiana United Methodist Church.

Perry was apprehensive as the date approached, unsure whether anyone but himself cared about organizing a tribe of Indians—surely an effort which ran counter to historical events in the state. Fifty-nine people showed up, among them Dr. Helen Rountree, an Old Dominion University anthropologist and expert on Virginia Indians, two sons and daughters of Jesse Bass, the last person to hold the title of Chief of the Nansemonds, and two representatives of the Mattaponis, who came to offer moral support.

The enthusiasm prompted Perry to call another meeting in August, at which time those present unanimously adopted by-laws similar to those of the other Virginia tribes. The by-laws call for the tribe to elect a chief, assistant chief, secretary, treasurer, and five councilmen to serve four-year terms and to work with all other Nansemonds to establish a cultural center, provide scholarship assistance to Indian students, and to receive any state or federal grants to carry out these objectives.

Next came the difficult part of the organizing effort: establishing a tribal roll from which those eligible for membership would be selected. No one, says Perry, can be admitted to membership without proof of a link to the Nansemonds.

The by-laws, election of officers, tribal roll, and tribal membership list are all necessary if the tribe is to be officially chartered by the State Corporation Commission and recognized by the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Ironically, in a white man's world the Indian must often hew to white man's rules. The organizational meetings are conducted according to Roberts' Rules of Order.

If Perry is successful in getting the Nansemonds recognized by the state, he'll be reversing a trend which started when white men landed in the New World in 1607 and which saw many Indian groups disappear. Meantime, the monthly meetings continue at Indiana United Methodist Church in Bowers Hill to the delight of the minister, the Rev. William E. Kube.

"What could be more fitting than for the group to meet at Indiana?" he says. "We at Indiana welcome the descendants of the Nansemonds and we hope that what Oliver Perry has started will be a long and lasting relationship.

Carl Cahill *is a freelance writer based in Chesapeake, Virginia.*

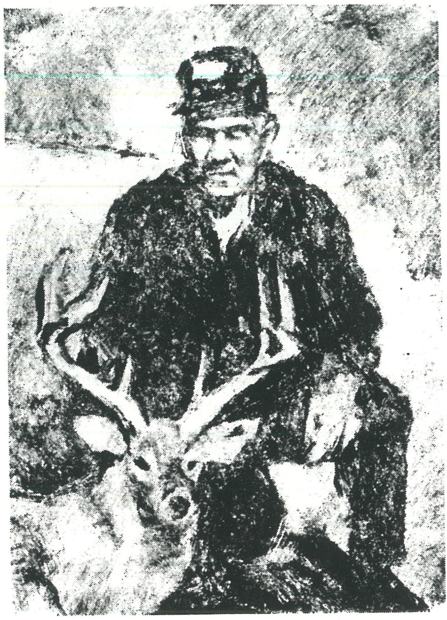


Illustration by Krawczyk

Earl Bass, a 75-year-old retired shipyard worker, is the new chief of the Nansemonds. The son of Jesse Bass, the last chief, Bass lives on land that has been in his family for more than 250 years.

The New Chief

The Nansemonds follow tradition.

Late in November, the Nansemonds met again at the Indiana United Methodist Church and unanimously elected 75-year-old Earl Bass their chief for a four-year term.

But Bass, a retired shipyard worker, was not present when he was honored with the leadership of the tribe. Indeed, he did not learn about it until he returned from a week-long deer hunting trip.

His election follows tradition since his father, Jesse Bass, was the last leader of the Nansemonds. Jesse died in 1960.

The new chief lives in an old farmhouse in a tiny settlement of five houses called Basstown, off Galberry Road in Chesapeake, a few miles from Indiana Church where he attended the Indian mission school. His home is filled with proof of his hunting prowess—at least a dozen mounted deer heads, stuffed foxes, bear and otters and hawks, and hundreds of photographs of himself with his trophies.

Though retired from the shipyard, Bass farms about 65 acres of land which has been in the family since at least the time of John Smith's arrival in 1607. A family cemetery is on the property.

Oliver Perry was named assistant chief. Christine Langston of Chesapeake was elected secretary; Frances Woodard of Portsmouth, in the only contested office, became treasurer. The tribe picked a five-person tribal council: Steven Bass, Paul Bass, Bud Bond, Corky Langston and Joe Weaver.

In other business at the organizational meeting, the Nansemonds named Albert Bass, brother of the new chief, an honorary past chief with the privilege of voting in tribal council meetings. James Coates of Virginia Beach and Dr. Helen Rountree of Old Dominion University were made honorary members of the tribe. Both Coates and Rountree are active in Indian affairs.

Finally, they set membership dues in the Nansemond Indian Tribal Association, Inc., at $2 a month.

—Carl Cahill

Guide to the Tribes

BY JANE HOWELL

Ours is a region rich in Indian heritage, but apart from the names of some rivers, lakes, and towns along the interstate, little seems to remain. What has happened to the tribes that gave their names to the Croatan National Forest; Nanticoke, Maryland; and Tuscarora, Pennsylvania?

The 1980 census estimates that nearly 100,000 native Americans live in the Mid-Atlantic region, though their tribal heritage has been obscured with each passing year since the first white man's arrival.

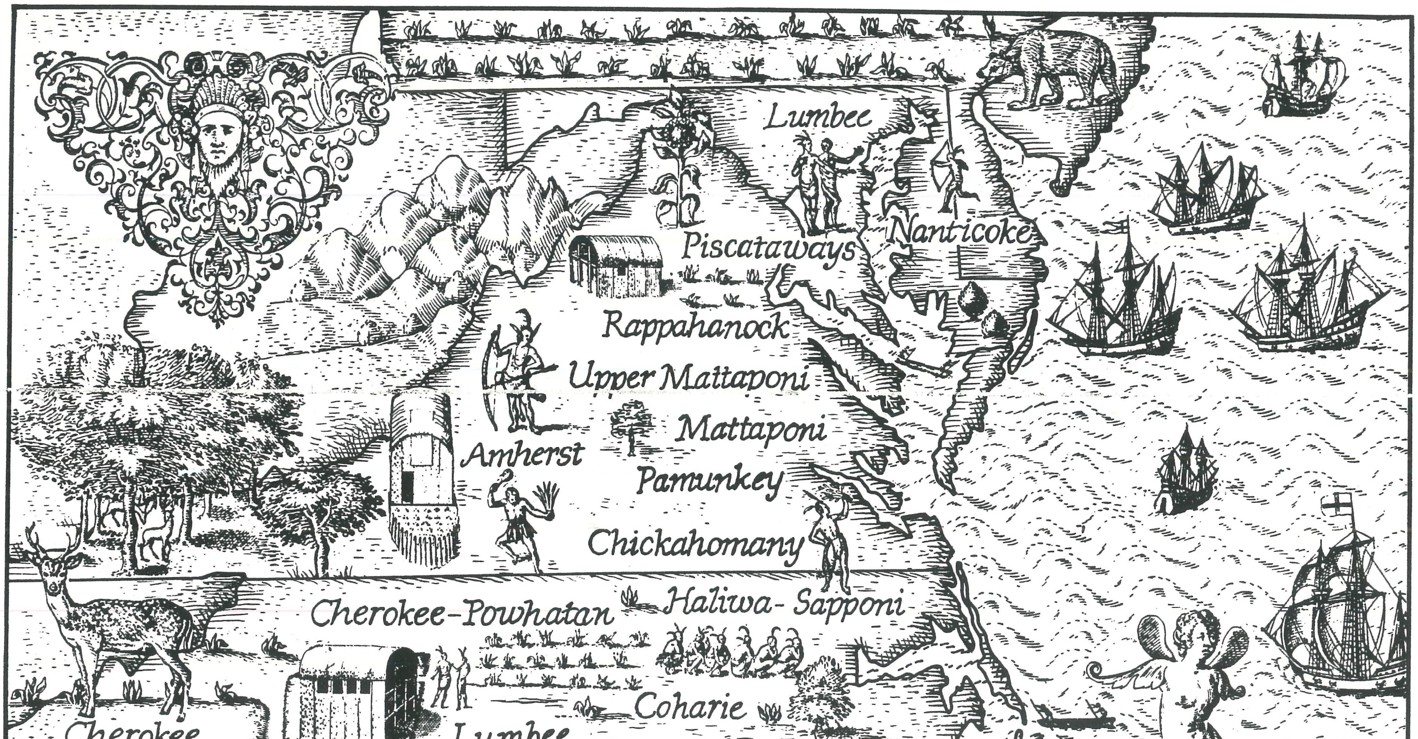
In the early 1700s, colonists began homesteading on Indian land, pushing the natives westward. Eventually, the Indians began to resist, prompting President Jackson in 1836 to sign into law the Indian Removal Act, authorizing the forced removal of most Eastern Indians to "Indian Territory" in the Oklahoma territory. As the settlers pressed farther westward, the government abandoned its plan of segregation in favor of assimilation. The General Allotment Act of 1887 deeded parcels of tribal land to individual Indian families. These parcels were subsequently sold, eliminating tribal bases.

Of the Indians that remained in the region, some continued to live in near isolation, in small tribal bands. Others intermarried with the settlers of the region —both black and white. Without evident tribal organizations, these people began to be labeled as "colored" or "free Negroes."

When racial prejudice increased following the Civil War, the Indians started to regroup, in order to preserve their heritage and distinguish themselves as native Americans. Individuals joined together under their ancestral tribal names, in many cases adopting members from small, related tribes. Some had settled far from their native lands, pushed back long ago by the white man.

Indians, by virtue of the Indian Citizenship Act, were granted the right to vote in 1924, and in 1934 the Indian Reorganization Act ended the allotment period. The government encouraged the formation of tribal governments, albeit American-style Democratic ones.

This trend was reversed when a series of Termination Acts were passed between 1953 and 1962, eliminating dozens of tribes and small bands from official



recognition.

It was not until the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s that tribes began taking active control of their affairs to lay the groundwork for the government's current self-determination policy, which grants a degree of sovereignty to recognized tribes.

While recognition allows the adaption of a government-to-government relationship with a tribe, rather than a government-to-individual relationship, and makes the tribe eligible for certain trusts, certain requirements must be met.

The federal government requires, among other things, that a tribe have democratically elected tribal governing bodies, a constitution and by-laws, and a tribal roll and membership list. The tribe itself may determine terms of office and eligibility for tribal membership, which may be based on the percentage of Indian blood (the Eastern Cherokee for example, must be at least 1/12 Cherokee), male descendency, or proof of a blood link to a member of the accepted tribal roll.

State recognition, is usually based on criteria similar to federal standards.

Following is a list of some of the region's indigenous tribes:

MARYLAND

Maryland has no policy of official recognition, though it maintains a Commission on Indian Affairs and may pass a bill allowing recognition in the upcoming General Assembly. The census reports 8,021 persons of Indian descent in the state, which is home to these tribes:

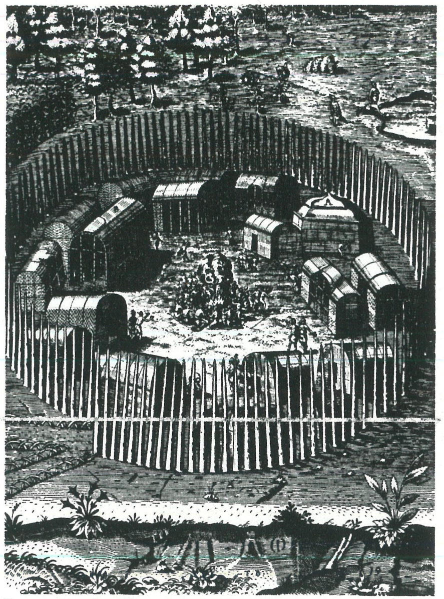
Piscataways. Based in southern Maryland, they are descended from a small tribe of Conoy Indians, named for their village, Piscataway.

Shawnees. Dutch settlers referred to this tribe as "southerners," which is regarded as the basis for their name. They originally lived in territory covering the mountains of West Virginia and Kentucky, but a small band survives in western Maryland.

Lumbees. Unlike the Shawnee and Piscataways, this group of Lumbees, based in Baltimore, has no formal tribal government. They are the urban cousins of the Lumbees of North Carolina.

DELAWARE

The state of Delaware, whose Indian population is about 1,330, recognizes just one tribe.



Engraving by Theodor de Bry after a drawing by John White

Nanticoke. The Nanticokes, whose name is derived from the words Nantego, Unechtgo, and Unalachtgo, meaning "tidewater people,"are related to the Delaware Indians. By the Seventeenth Century the Nanticokes, along with the Piscataways and Choptanks, were the only Indians living on the Eastern and Western Shores of the Chesapeake Bay. In the mid-Seventeenth Century, many of the Nanticokes migrated north, first to Pennsylvania, then to Canada. By 1792, it is reported only 30 remained, calling themselves the Wiwash. The tribe now has over 450 active members, and several hundred more inactive members.It operates a cultural center and museum near its tribal base, just east of Millsboro.

VIRGINIA

Home of the Virginia Indians and seat of the Powhatan Confederacy, Virginia, with an estimated Indian population of 9,336, recognizes several tribes and has two state reservations.

Pamunkey. They maintain a state reservation and have a tribal population estimated near 350 in 1972.

Mattaponi. Also maintain a reservation. Their 1972 tribal estimate is 394.

Upper Mattaponi, Chickahominie, Eastern Chickahominie, Rappahannock, and **Nansemond.** All gained official recognition in the early part of the century, and, like the Mattaponis and Pamunkeys, are Algonquian. The Nansemonds became disorganized sometime in the mid-century and have recently regrouped.

NORTH CAROLINA

North Carolina has the largest Indian population of the mid-Atlantic region, estimated at nearly 65,000.

Eastern Cherokee. The largest tribe in the region, and the only one recognized by the federal government. The Cherokee own tribal land in the state which they operate as a reservation.

Lumbee. The Lumbee, once regarded as a branch of the Eastern Cherokee, officially changed their name to avoid that association.

Haliwa-Saponi. The Saponi are of Siouan stock.

Waccamaw-Siouan. The remnants of this small tribe were once thought to have incorporated with the Catawbas.

Non-recognized tribes within North Carolina:

Meherrin. This tribe of Iroquoian stock is currently seeking state recognition.

Cherokee-Powhatan. Previously known as the Indians of Person County, and, prior to 1913, as the Cubans, the Cherokee-Powhatan have applied for federal recognition.

Tuscarora. The "hemp gatherers," this separated branch of Iroquoians also lived in Virginia.

Catawba. A number of Catawbas live in North Carolina, but the tribe's base is in South Carolina.

WASHINGTON, D.C.

The Potomac Valley was once home to the Potomacs, who are estimated to have numbered 150 in 1923, but only 17 in 1920. The nation's capital has a current Indian population of 1,000, of no predominant indigenous tribe.

PENNSYLVANIA

Once home to the Susquehannocks, an Iroquoian tribe, as well as host to many tribes migrating northward during the Seventeenth Century, the state has a current Indian population of 9,500, but no office of Indian affairs.

NEW JERSEY

Like Pennsylvania, the state has no office of Indian affairs, and no federally recognized tribes. Nonetheless, it was once home to many tribes, and its lakes, rivers, and cities still bear the names of its ancestral inhabitants. Census data reports 8,394 Indians reside in the state.

WEST VIRGINIA

The U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs reports no recognized tribes or bands in West Virginia. One thousand six hundred persons of Indian descent now live in West Virginia, most likely descendants of the Shawnee, Cherokee, and Ohio Valley tribes.

Jane Howell *is an intern for* Country Magazine.